

Into the Wild

For a long time I thought I didn't like hiking. My first real hiking experiences were with a long-term 6'2 boyfriend. He wasn't just 6'2, he was also a speed walker. My 5'3 legs couldn't keep up. We had a fundamentally different approach to hiking. His objective was to reach the top or the end of the hike. Mine was to enjoy the journey. Our hikes together were not enjoyable as either I was running to keep up, or I was feeling guilty that he was slowing down for me. This led me to the conclusion that hiking was not for me.

A few years ago I was travelling in America and a friend suggested I go to Kanab in southern Utah. I followed her advice, arrived and cast around for the local activities. What do you know? It's all about hiking. Resolutely I sought advice from the visitor centre, loaded my car with gallons of water and high energy snacks, and set off. Surviving that first solo hike endowed me with a real and unexpected sense of pride.

Since that time I have been quite an avid hiker. I'm not fast and I'm not particularly hardy. I walk alone and I am scared of everything...but I get there and that makes it all worthwhile. I have noticed that I go through a clear set of thought phases throughout every hike. It starts with a search for information. I want to make sure I am on the right trail, going the right way. I have a particular fondness for sign-in books as I like the idea that someone will eventually come looking for me. I usually start this stage with quite a cheery attitude, congratulating myself for taking on another hiking challenge.

The next stage is fear with the length of the stage depending on my location. American hikes have become quite detailed in this regard. I start thinking about ticks, then spiders, then snakes. Poison ivy sometimes makes an appearance. There is then a leap to bears, mountain lions and moose, culminating in crazy axe murderers. I never want to be the tourist whose leg is found washed up on a riverbank after she disappeared three months earlier. This stage usually ends with thoughts about what I would do if I found a dead body. I have also planned what to do if I am

attacked by a bear (film it on my camera and make millions on YouTube if I survive) and how to talk someone out of a mountain top suicide.

I am usually jolted out of this reverie by a surge of adrenalin courtesy of an animal darting out of the undergrowth, a branch dropping to the forest floor, other hikers making an appearance, or tripping over a tree root. I then settle into an automatic walking pattern and this is when I do my best work. My mind goes into overdrive resolving whatever issues are bothering me - from planning out a business to resolving an argument. This phase generally lasts until there is a significant change in the level of hiking difficulty. This triggers the blame phase.

This is the point where I remember that I don't like hiking. I am sweaty and grubby, my feet hurt, and I don't know if I am going the right way. If I break my leg I have limited survival skills and I could be here for days. The fitness benefits are outweighed by the pain and I am starting to get blisters. I wash this stage away with a water stop and this bounces me into a contented stage. I smile as I walk and start spotting interesting features along the path. This stage can only be reversed by walking into a spider web. This is also the longest stage.

Finally, I reach the summit, or waterfall, or ruins, or whatever it is I am hiking to. Here a wave of satisfaction rolls over me and I congratulate myself on making it. I reward myself with a snack, enjoy the surrounds, then start the process all over again as I walk the return leg.

